The Optics of War by Joseph Goebbels

War, too, has its characteristic face. One sees it many places in the homeland, and everywhere at the front. Certain unmistakable signs clearly point to war. Visitors from abroad, however, say that during a quick visit, it is hardly possible to see that the Reich is at war. That is in fact how it is. Someone who today walks down the streets of a big city, and even more a mid-sized or small one, scarcely gets the impression that we Germans have been fighting for our lives for three and a half years. People look in good shape and decently nourished. At first glance, their clothing and shoes look neat, the streets are clean and in order, except in the cities that have been bombed, and movies, concert halls, and theaters are overflowing. Even though the department stores and luxury shops have hardly anything for sale that goes beyond basic needs, they try by hard work and careful displays to maintain the appearance of a normal offering of merchandise. In short, the face of the war in the homeland is not such that one can immediately see what is at stake.

In part, we are keeping up appearances for sake of appearance, which is probably acceptable. However, in part it is genuine, which is less admirable. At home, we are living life in a way that in some respects is anything but appropriate for wartime. We do not want to split hairs here, promoting a wartime lifestyle that depends entirely on outward appearances. We do not want to insist on privations that have no significance, but will have deep impact on our whole lifestyle, as well as on our thoughts and feelings. For example, it would be a mistake to close the movies, concert halls, and theaters to prove that we are at war and must be serious about everything. We do not need to prove how serious war is. That will come on its own. But we do not always need to give way to it. When we maintain the cultural life of millions of our people at home and in part at the front as well in a way appropriate to war, providing some relief, some edification, some relaxation in hard times, and in ways that have no measurable impact on the huge exertions we put into the war effort, it would be foolish and unforgivable to permit stubborn dogma or outward appearances to destroy the spiritual peace of millions. That is of greater value than what we would gain by abolishing these pleasures.

One should not think that we are arguing for a lifestyle during war that follows doctrinaire principles. We understand the thinking and feelings of our people too well not to know what they want and what they think

appropriate or inappropriate during war. Things that demand few personnel and expense, but which provide relief for millions of people, not only should, but also must, be maintained. For example, radio, theater, and film provide relaxation and spiritual recuperation for the whole German people, but require that only a few thousand people be released from tasks important to the war effort — and given their abilities and training, they probably would not perform all that well there anyway. For the sake of the whole people, one should not touch these institutions, which are also important to the war effort. Even in conditions of total war, they are necessary. The best criterion is to ask what resources are required on the one hand, and for how many people the war is made more bearable on the other hand. No one should suspect us of some sort of iconoclasm. The German cultural landscape is blooming as never before in the visual arts, theater, opera, concerts, film, the press, radio, and literature. That is persuasive proof of the correctness of our approach on the one hand, and of the restrictions of our civilian life on the other.

Here the problem becomes more difficult. We still have a variety of institutions that serve either no one or very few, but demand resources in personnel and material that bear no proportion to the results. We all know, for example that there are shops everywhere in which there is hardly anything to buy. When one walks into them, one feels as if he had landed on a lonely island in the middle of stormy seas. After a long search, one finds a native somewhere behind a counter who gapes without understanding at the naive question whether this or that can be purchased, looking just like a member of a foreign tribe that only understands Swahili.

From a superficial perspective, it may seem useful and advisable to maintain appearances by keeping such shops open, but in view of the hard necessities of war, they serve no purpose. One thus closes them and transfers their employees to more useful duties. Everyone knows that there are bars and locales where only the regular customers can get anything to eat or drink. They can usually be counted on the fingers of a few hands. For every ten guests, there is one employee. Others get annoyed. They stand outside, find no place to sit down, and are angry. The optics of war require an end to such things. We have nothing against a refined lifestyle, but everything has its time. Today, in the middle of war, it is out of place. It does not fit in. As gladly as we will welcome it after the war as over, it is offensive to us today. Away with it!

We know that will annoy a few thousand people. We remind them that today it is a matter not only of facts, but also of the psychological face of war. A fighting community must obey certain rules, or else the whole spirit suffers. Just as at an officer at the front must be a model to his men both of bravery and camaraderie, so the more prosperous and socially elevated in the homeland must be an example of diligence and solidarity to those less fortunate. This has nothing to do with servility. We have no desire to talk of making everyone the same. However, the laws of war demand a certain lifestyle that everyone must accept if the community is not to run the risk of being seriously harmed by a lack of national solidarity.

We have heard that in the few big cities that still have bars, not much is happening. There is hardly anything to drink. An old piano player pounds on a tired piano. The guests sit in silence, pretending there is peace. Why do we allow such nonsense? Put the pianist at the service of the troops, and the staff can certainly find useful employment in some important war enterprise, or perhaps in cafeteria or factory dining hall. Troops heading home on leave will certainly be happy if they can find a place to sleep in the empty establishment while waiting for their next connection, rather than having to wait in an uncomfortable train station.

People ask why the government does not order that to happen. The government cannot pass a law to deal with every problem or minor annoyance that affects the war effort. It must depend upon the people to arrange their lifestyle in a way that takes appropriate notice of the war. It should be a matter more of education than of the law, and one would hardly know where to begin and end. Individually, these are insignificant matters, but together they affect what we call the face of the war. One makes a big mistake if he thinks one could impress foreign countries by maintaining such things. Nothing impresses both friend and foe today as much as total and radical war leadership, both at the front and at home. If we win, the whole world will be our friend; if we lose, we will be able to count our friends with a few fingers.

During the war, we want a people whose approach to life includes both serious and more relaxed moments, even at times cheerful ones. It should take serious things seriously, and lighter things lightheartedly. It should not close its eyes to the victims of the war, but neither should it be depressed. It must always remain aware that we are fighting this war for a great and noble cause. Everything that helps in this regard is good and important to the war

effort. The heavier the burdens of the war become, the more we must accept them with a spirit of solidarity. Now is the time to make National Socialist teaching and training effective within and around us. We must behave differently than we did during the World War. During that long war, people became more and more alienated and distant from each other. Today, we must grow closer and closer. That is the only way we will master the growing difficulties, and they must be mastered, or we will not reach our goal.

If we compare ourselves to the other warring peoples, no one will be able to say that we are demanding too much of the German people. There are neutral states today in which people live worse than we do. According to eyewitness reports, life in the hinterlands of the Soviet Union is so terrible that we in comparison are almost in paradise. We are in no position to complain. It could be a lot worse, and we have to hold out, since our only choice is to fight or to lose our freedom and our lives. We have very reason to thank fate that it gives us so many opportunities to lessen the burdens of war for each other. That is no reason for too much of a good thing, for allowing a certain group to live in a way that is hardly different than they lived in peace. Unfortunately, a few of us forget all too easily that the elimination of the direct threat to our borders did not eliminate the larger threat, and that there is a lot of work to do before we are through. Thus, we have to take every opportunity to repeat that. Our fundamental principles of war remain the same. We cannot change them every week merely so that we have something new to say. Rather, we see our duty as constantly repeating them until they become the spiritual property of our whole people.

The daily concerns of the war all too easily distract us from the fundamentals. The often confusing polemics about current events sometimes conceal the spiritual lines of this world struggle and push the principles into the background. That makes it even more necessary to turn attention from tiring daily matters back to principles, which are the foundation of our war policy. Even today, we must attempt to see the war as later historians will see it. Only then can we see the events of the moment with the sovereign assurance and calm that they deserve. Our attitude toward the war will this be immovable and unshakable. We will see the policies and war leadership of today as a piece of coming history, in which we ourselves are participating directly or indirectly. We will feel an active, personal role.

That requires an inner and outward approach to the war that is, without doubt, lofty. It depends not on the events of the moment, but rather on a view of the great movements of our day, which proceed whether we like it or not. As in every other aspect of human life, recognizing the connections is the most important prerequisite to properly evaluating the facts as well as the imponderables. It is sometimes just as important to know how things are perceived by the people as to know how they actually are. The psychology of war leadership plays a critical role in today's war of peoples. It is more important today than in any war of the past. As a result, the optical appearance of our civilian life cannot stand in crass contrast to the real war, but rather they must be in harmony. Only then can we feel like a modern warrior people. Our opponents focus on the outward face of the war in some respects, neglecting the facts. We, on the other hand, put the more important facts in the foreground, but sometimes neglect the purely optical aspects. That is a mistake that can and must be corrected. A few thousand people will complain, but the whole people will thank us. It will see that we are not only speaking of a people's war, but actually waging it.

Neutral and enemy nations will thereby see that we are determined to win the war, whatever it costs. The war is not being fought to maintain peace, but rather to gain it. We have to be total. The peacetime things we give up today serve the war effort. The most total war is the shortest war. It forms our image, and we form its image. Image and reality must agree. Thus, we want to wage war with all our strength. It should be the focus of our efforts and of our daily labors, and it should fill our dreams at night. It places hard duty on us, but we obey for the sake of the coming happy peace.